

# Love as the Basis of Spiritual Growth

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Let us see how Buddhism presents and develops its concept of love or respect and concern for all that lives. The Buddha preached and maintained that all life in the universe is a product of natural evolution, each little thing therein in the diverse eco-systems possessing its own right to exist. This thinking blossomed out in Buddhism's greatest contribution to mankind, namely the concept of *mettā* [Skt. *maitrī*] or universal loving kindness. One loves every other thing in the universe in a direct relationship of one to another, without a mediator or creator. We are after all, in the world we live in, a part of a complete network. In spite of our differences, we are integrated into a whole and each one of us loves to be loved. Therefore harmony and healthy relationships of one to another are considered a must which necessarily leads to a smooth running order in the universe.

Striking a very high note, as it were, in his personal admonition to his own son Rahula in the Mahārāhulovāda Sutta [M.1.424], the Buddha tells that the cultivation and practice of *mettā* or universal loving kindness, dispels the unwholesome mental frame called enmity or hostility. It eliminates the possibility of 'coming into conflict with' those around us. This conflict and confrontation is referred to as *vyāpāda* and is considered as leading thereafter to violence or *vihimsā*. [*Mettaṃ hi te Rāhula bhāvanam bhāvayato yo vyāpādo so pahiyissati.* loc.cit.].

In loving via the medium of *mettā*, one expects nothing back as a return or reward. Love in *mettā* knows of no bleeding hearts, with or without arrows piercing through them. This concept of love also brings along with it the cognate virtue of equality [or *egalite*]. In love, all have to become equal, and where honest equality prevails love must know no barriers, as known or unknown, friendly or

otherwise. Not even as I and another. The amount of love one is required to give to others cannot in any way be less than what one wishes and expects others to bestow upon oneself.

Phrases like ' He who loves himself harms not another ' [*Tasmā na hiṃse paraṃ attakāmo* as at S.1.75] or ' Taking oneself as the norm [i.e. that one likes to be loved and treated with respect] let one cause no harm or injury to others ' [*Attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye* as at Dhp. v. 129] clearly indicate the Buddhist self-stand [*attūpanāyika*] judgement in the practice of love towards others. This applies to all grades of life [*sabba-pāṇa-bhūta-hita-anukampī*], literally all living things. To us, this practice of love does not appear as an injunction that one must love oneself first, and then and thereafter, extend love to others. The direction given is that one must love others to the same extent that one wishes to be loved by others. That is the meaning of *attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā* = taking oneself as the model of loving. It certainly does not mean giving priority to oneself.

The Buddhist concept of love has the capacity to extend not only from human to animal but also from animal to the world of plants as well. There are schools of scientists in the world today who maintain that the world of plants also yearn for love and care. They claim that plants react very specifically to human emotions like love and cruelty in their own way. Besides, the plants as an integral part of our ecosystem have to be treated with utmost respect and recognition. For in the guarantee of their survival lies our own survival. There seems to be very little doubt about that. We shall discuss elsewhere, from the Buddhist point of view, about their being animate or inanimate, sentient or insentient. At any rate, it appears to be the greatest day in the life of a Buddhist saint when he sees no difference between his own body of flesh and blood and the trees and the grass that grow in the wild around him. So wishes Thera Tālapuṭa in verse No. 1101 of the Theragāthā.

When will that ever be, when I can compare

All infinite components of which I am made,  
 Those within me, with those without  
 Like trees and grass and creepers that trail?  
 Seeing them all equal , well and true !  
 When will such vision , mine ever be?

[Translated by the author]

*Kadā nu kaṭṭhe ca tiṇe latā ca khandhe ime ' haṃ amite ca dhamme  
 Ajjhakkān ' eva ca bāhirāni samaṃ tuleyyaṃ tadidaṃ kadā me.*

Thag. v. 1101

In Buddhism, this practice of universal loving kindness or *mettā* is called ' the Godly way of living ' or *brahma-vihāra*. It knows no revenge. It is one of four gradually upgraded qualities of love. Collectively they are also called 'sates of unbounded or magnanimous living' : *appamāna-vihāra* or *appamañña*. The other three are compassion or *karuṇā* , appreciative [not sympathetic] joy or *muditā* and equanimity or *upekkhā* . We wish to stress here adequately the word living [*vihāra*]. These aspects of love cannot remain as mere thoughts in one's head or as mere wishes on one's lips. They must necessarily get translated into a philosophy of living. It must indeed be lived. If wishes were horses, then beggars would be kings. By virtue of their being life-toners, they are literally soul-elevating. They enrich our lives as we live that way. Hence they are called *Brahma-vihāra* , i.e. Godly or Heavenly Modes of Living.

At the same time, universal loving kindness [or universal acceptance of friendship with everything that lives] practiced in this manner contributes to the much needed Buddhist virtue of ego-destruction or ridding oneself of the menacing notion of I and mine [*ahaṃkāra- mamiṅkāra- mānānusaya*]. This absence of ego is the basic character of the goal of Nirvana. The over-inflation of the ego or self-hood is said to stand in the way of true happiness in this life as well as in the way of final release out of the painful round of births and deaths of

*samsāra*. It warps and distorts good human relationships. It takes the lubricants off our interpersonal relationships.

Because we know we love ourselves and we know love plays such a great role in our lives, let us give this freely to others. Let none in the world we live in suffer for want of love. And let none suffer because we do not truly practice love towards all that live, like ourselves. Let us not forget our callous disrespect for the lives of others and the pain we thereby bring upon them.

**May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.**

***Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā.***